

Repentance and the Gospel

By Mike Gendron

Followers of Jesus Christ are familiar with the word "repentance" but many are unsure of its biblical meaning or its role in the salvation of sinners. Some would argue passionately that it must be coupled with faith as the only saving response to the Gospel. Others say that repentance is not necessary for the salvation of sinners, only faith (2 Tim 2:25). Consider the importance of repentance in the ministry of our Lord Jesus. The very first word of His very first sermon was "repent" (Mat. 4:17). He later declared that He had come to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). His last sermon to His apostles before ascending into heaven, included a command to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). This leaves no doubt to the Savior's position on repentance.

Repentance Defined

The Greek-English Lexicon provides an excellent definition of the common Greek word "metanoia" used for repentance in the New Testament. It means "to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness." We find in its meaning a conviction that produces action. Such a change is profoundly noted by Paul's description of the Thessalonians: "You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thes. 1:9). These saints displayed three elements of repentance: a turning from sinful behavior, a turning to God and a desire to serve Him. It is impossible to turn to God without turning away from sin. People who continue to live in habitual sin and think they are saved must be warned that Jesus saves us from our sin, not in our sin.

One of the most gifted preachers of the 17th century, Thomas Watson, defined repentance as a "grace of God's Spirit, which enables a sinner to be inwardly humbled and visibly reformed." Repentance moves a man to recognize the wickedness of his sin which produces godly sorrow and a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Convicted by the Holy Spirit, the sinner acknowledges his sinful nature, confesses his sins and makes a heartfelt plea for God's forgiveness (Psalm 51:1-4; 1 John 1:9; Luke 18:13; Prov. 28:13). Scripture says that a truly repentant person hates the sin he once loved and is ashamed of it (Ezekiel 36:31; Rom. 6:21). He forsakes his wicked ways and turns to God (Isa. 55:7; Acts 26:20). Repentance produces a genuine desire to be victorious over sin and a longing for the day he will be forever delivered from it (1 John 3:3).

Repentance Produces Change

Repentance produces not only a change in mind, but it also leads to a changed heart and life (Isa. 55:7). Intellectually, repentance sees sin as an affront to our holy God and Creator. The sinner understands that his sin has separated him from God and caused enmity with God. God's Word instructs him to turn to Christ as his only hope. No one can cling to their sin and to Christ because "the mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life" (Rom. 8:6).

Emotionally, repentance is accompanied by sorrow because sin has greatly offended our loving and gracious God. This sorrow, in and of itself, is not repentance because people can have sorrow and not repent. Judas is an example of one who felt great remorse but did not repent

(Mat. 27:3). When repentance is produced from godly sorrow, according to the will of God, it leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10). God's kindness is meant to lead sinners to repentance, but a stubborn and unrepentant heart stores up His wrath for the day of judgment (Rom. 2:4-5).

Volitionally, repentance produces a transformation of the will which will be evidenced by a change in direction and purpose (Rom. 6:6; 12:2). The change in behavior is not repentance; it is the fruit that repentance brings forth. The Lord Jesus gave an example of this fruit when "the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Mt. 12:41). After Jonah preached, the Ninevites' king issued this proclamation: "'Let everyone call urgently on God...so that we will not perish.' When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened" (Jonah 3:8b- 10). According to Jesus, who is our ultimate authority for faith, their repentance produced fruit; they turned from evil ways.

Whenever God grants repentance, a vivid contrast is observed between the life that was once dominated by the power of darkness and the new life in Christ Jesus (Col. 1:13; Titus 3:3-7; 1 Pet. 4:1-4). The law is a tutor to bring men to Christ through repentance and faith (Gal. 3:24). Each conversion will be vindicated by works of repentance and obedience (Acts 26:20; Rom. 6:17). God saves us the way we are, but He never leaves us the way we were (1 Thes. 4:3). Those whom God loves, He reproves and disciplines to bring them to repentance (Rev. 3:19). Salvation is not just from the punishment of sin, but also from the power of sin. Those who are saved through Christ will turn from sin to be saved from it. This can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit who converts slaves of unrighteousness to slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-18).

Repentance and Faith

It has often been said that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin: distinctively different yet inseparable. They are both sovereignly granted by God at the moment of conversion (Acts 11:18; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29). Once received, these divine gifts continue to be manifested throughout the life of believers (Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 12:1-2). It is biblically inconsistent and theologically problematic to suppose that anyone could believe in the Lord Jesus yet not repent. After all, repentance includes turning from unbelief to belief in the Lord Jesus (Mat. 21:32). Genuine saving faith is always accompanied by repentance. Paul testified to both Jews and Gentiles of "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Faith that is not grounded in repentance is not genuine God-given faith. Those who refuse to repent should fear God's wrath in the day of judgment (Mat. 11:20-24).

Repentance is a Divine Command

Paul wrote: "God...commands all men every- where to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30-31). Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, our Lord commanded, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22). Our Lord began His earthy ministry with the command: "Repent and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). He also commanded the churches at Ephesus, Sardis and Pergamum to repent (Rev. 2:5,16; 3:3). Sinners are commanded to turn from sin to the Savior to escape the coming judgment. Tragically, the call to repentance is the critical truth that is most often left out of Gospel preaching and evangelism. Yet Luke's account of

the Great Commission includes a mandate to preach repentance (Luke 24:47).

The Importance of Repentance

In Peter's first two sermons he commanded his listeners to repent for the forgiveness and expiation of their sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19). On another occasion, when Simon the magician sinned by trying to buy God's power with his money, Peter called him to "repent from his wickedness" (Acts 8:22). Peter also taught that repentance is necessary for salvation: "The Lord...is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). This beautiful insight into the long-suffering and compassionate nature of God shows the importance of repentance. Our Lord gave specific instructions to the apostles on how to evangelize and then sent them out into the world preaching "men should repent" (Mark 6:12).